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AUTHOR Cochren, John R.
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ABSTRACT

Selecting a superintendent is one of the most critical decisions that a school board can make. Choosing an appropriate superintendent is fundamental for achieving the board's mission of the school corporation. This paper argues that boards need to address the question, Do we want a leader or an implementor? The paper describes various leadership theories that are applicable to the superintendent-selection process. Demings (1990) referred to the concept of "constancy of purpose" in bringing new approaches successfully to industry. Other theorists argue that alignment between the individual superintendent and the actual expectations of the position is crucial for success. The hiring of a superintendent should be viewed as a critical element of long-term planning. Boards should included parents and nonparents, business and community leaders, faculty, and staff in the selection process in order to promote stability of purpose. (LMI)

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SELECTING A SUPERINTENDENT:

A LEADER OR AN IMPLEMENTOR?

by

John R. Cochren, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Indiana Purdue University Fort Wayne

ABSTRACT

The selection of a superintendent has been identified as the most critical decision that board members make. The selection made is fundamental in efforts to achieve the board's mission for the corporation. Boards should address a basic question - Do they want a leader or an implementor?

Various leadership theories have been developed that could effectively be applied to the superintendent selection process. Demings (1990) referred to the concept of constancy of purpose in bringing new approaches successfully to organizations. This concept has implications for the superintendent selection process. Other theorists suggest that the alignment of the individual with the actual expectations of the position is essential for success.

A healthy dose of introspection and planning on behalf of boards would simplify the selection process. All segments of the school community would benefit and enhance achieving educational mission of the corporation.

School board members are confronted with many critical decisions. No single decision is more critical than the selection of a superintendent for the corporation. The decision board members make in the selection process is fundamental in their efforts to achieve the mission of the school corporation. As board members contemplate their role in the selection of the superintendent, a basic and essential question should be considered. What type of

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superintendent do they truly want for the school corporation?

The answer to this question is indicative as to the direction the school corporation will take to resolve the immediate and long range problems that confront all school corporations. Do they want a superintendent that will function as an educational leader and utilize the skills acquired by training and experience to make recommendations that are in the best interests of all the students in the school corporation? Or, do they want a superintendent that foremost considers the political reality of recommending to the board what the political leaders of the board have determined to be in the best interests of the board; and, therefore, in the best interests of the students.

Fiedler (1967) addressed the importance of recognizing the organizational setting in the selecting of administrators for a particular position. He stated, "If our theory is correct, then the recruitment and selection of leaders can be effective only when we can also specify the relevant components of the situation for which the leader is being recruited. . . . The organization must then be aware of the type of leadership into which the individual must be successfully guided, but this is basically no different than seeing that an electrical engineer does not get assigned to bookkeeping duties" (p. 152).

An interpretation of Fiedler's concept as applied to the selection of a superintendent by school boards might be: Does the board want a superintendent that actually provides leadership for the organization or do they want a superintendent that serves to implement the board's agenda? The board should come to grips with this fundamental question before they begin the search process for a superintendent. Once this issue is resolved, the board should proceed based upon the direction they have chosen. If the board is sincere, it can then recruit the type of superintendent that will be in harmony with the organizational environment that the board wants to maintain.

Boards, in arriving at the decision to select a superintendent, might serve their corporations more effectively by selecting a leader as envisioned by Bennis. Bennis (1989) identified a factor of leadership critical to the perception of those in the organization. He suggested, "The first basic ingredient of leadership is a guiding vision. The leader has a clear idea of what he wants to do - professionally and personally - and the strength to persist in the face of setbacks, even failures. Unless you know where you are going and why, you cannot possibly get there" (pp. 39-49).

Demings (1990), in the development of his Total Quality Management philosophy, referred to the concept of constancy

of purpose as critical in developing a program to bring the new approach successfully to industry. The constancy of purpose concept has a dramatic implication for school corporations. According to Bradley (1993), school corporations will need to spend more time thinking about the future. The obstacles to establishing constancy of purpose and thinking about the future are the tendencies of superintendents to change jobs every three to five years. In addition, board members are being replaced at an increasing rate. Bradley (1993) indicated a solution to this dilemma was possible if superintendents and boards would involve the most stable members of their communities in the development and implementation of long-term or strategic planning.

The hiring of a superintendent should be viewed as a critical element of long-term planning. By including parents and non-parents, business leaders, community leaders, faculty, and staff as an integral part of the selection process from the beginning, boards would enhance the chances of selecting a superintendent that could provide the stability needed. Thus, constancy of purpose would expand beyond just the interpretations and expectations of the current board members to include the various stakeholders that are present in all school communities.

It is suggested that a healthy dose of introspection, sincerity, and planning on behalf of boards would simplify

their search for the superintendent that would match their predetermined needs. A great amount of time, effort, and money could be saved if the board had resolved the key question. Do they truly want an educational leader for the corporation or do they want an implementor to pursue individual or collective agendas?

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